

7 TOWARDS NON-REPRODUCTIVE EDUCATION

Introduction

This thesis has investigated curriculum and classroom practices at Greytown School. First, it showed how the Koori students' oppositional behaviour influenced curriculum at a whole school and classroom level. Second, it illustrated how teachers' responses to the Koori students' oppositional behaviour resulted in a curriculum which was implicated in the continuing educational disadvantage of the majority of the school's Koori students. Chapter 1 located the study within a research tradition which examined disaffected school students. The chapter also established that there was value in looking at the interactions between students and teachers, and how the intersection of their respective responses to their school context may create conditions of resistance. It was argued that addressing the conditions of resistance had the potential to provide opportunities for schools and teachers to change socially reproductive practices. Chapter 2 described and justified the ethnographic methods employed to investigate the research context. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 contain the data collected through these methods. Chapter 3 detailed the curriculum changes made at the school in an attempt to benefit the Koori students. Chapter 4 discussed the responses of the Koori students to their school. Chapter 5 described the classroom curriculum forged in the relationship between teachers and students at the school. In the analysis of data in Chapter 6 it was argued that although Greytown School made significant changes to its curriculum, it still failed its Koori students at the level of classroom practice. The classroom curriculum produced in the face of persistent

student opposition continued to be socially reproductive. Consequently there were conditions at the school which encouraged student resistance.

There are two main aims to this chapter. The first is to speculate on ways that Greytown School and its teachers might move beyond the point of failure discussed in the last chapter. The second is to propose a model through which schools serving similar communities to Greytown may contextualise their curriculum. Both of these aims attempt to show how schools and teachers could challenge a socially reproductive curriculum. Before discussing each of these aims in turn, Figure 6.3 is reintroduced. This figure, which depicts the interplay of the school and educational relationships, focuses the discussion which follows concerning how Greytown School and other schools might challenge the reproductive nature of their curriculum.

Figure 6.3 Interplay of School and Educational Relationships

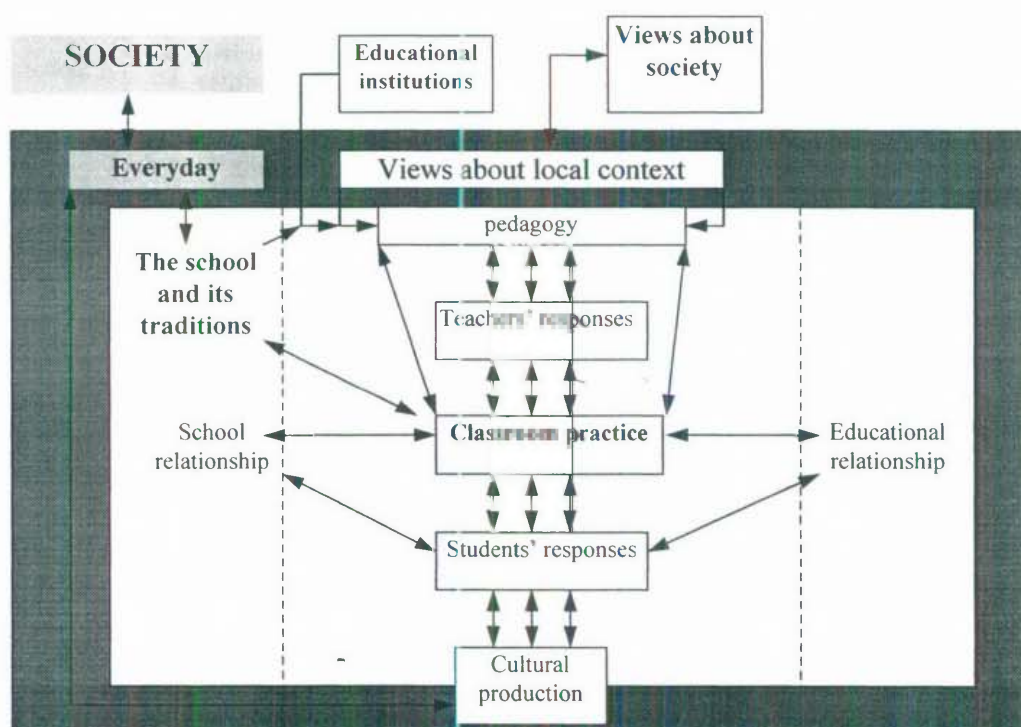


Figure 6.3 was used in Chapter 6 to pinpoint Greytown's failure to successfully articulate school and educational relationships. The analysis showed that there were conditions implicated in this failure which were specific to the Greytown context. Yet it is equally clear from the literature (see, for example: Connell *et al.*, 1991; Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1996) that schools serving students who live in poverty share the difficulties of student opposition and persistent low academic achievement. Consequently, the figure serves the dual purpose of providing an analytical framework within the specific Greytown context, and a heuristic device through which other schools might contextualise their curriculum. The next section of this chapter considers ways through which Greytown School might have challenged its conditions of resistance.

Future Change at Greytown School

In fairness, suggestions for change at Greytown School must acknowledge gains achieved in a challenging context. The research data in Chapter 3 showed areas where the school had gained a favourable reputation. Much of this reputation centred on aspects of the official school curriculum, and seemed to suggest that external praise for the school was offered without attempting to evaluate the real effectiveness of Greytown's curriculum in terms of educational success for the students. Perhaps this indicates that low expectations for the students were not confined to the local community. Certainly there was evidence that teachers shared low expectations. The failure of the wider educational system to show any sustained concern about the Koori

students' school achievement is perhaps a sign that low expectations were also part of the "system". In the analysis, however, there is a recognition that there is a contradiction between success at the public and private levels of the school's work. The school's achievement in developing a humane, caring environment for its students is noted. The caring environment was accomplished by accepting and valuing the students and their parents, and thereby explicitly rejecting individual and community pathology as explanations for student opposition. The development of positive school relationships was one of the achievements of the school. It was argued in Chapter 6 that many educationally disadvantaged students are excluded from schooling at this point. This is particularly the case with Aboriginal students (see, for example, Malin, 1990). However, it needs to be recognised that although deficit logic was rejected in the school's official ethos, there was a subtle and implicit deficit logic underpinning classroom practices which lowered curriculum expectations for students. (See also, Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1994, 1996.) Importantly, the school saw that there was a connection between student opposition and its curriculum and the nature of the social relationships between teachers and students. It is reasonable, then, to suggest that changes at Greytown School should maintain, albeit with some changes, the positive school relationships which encouraged the students to attend school. However, positive school relationships should be seen as a means through which educational outcomes might be enhanced for all students. Thus, the aim would be clearly focussed on extending educational relationships.

In Chapter 6 the crucial site of resistance was seen to be in the interplay of the school and educational relationships (see Figure 6.3). It was proposed that there were a

number of influences on responses by students and teachers which affected the production of classroom practices. There were four main components identified in this interplay, namely, the community, the students, the teachers and the school. Suggestions for change in each of these is now considered.

The data indicated that there were themes in the Greytown Koori community which influenced the way the Koori students responded to their school and classroom. The Koori community's relationship with institutions in mainstream Australian society is characterised by resistance and struggle against what they see as an oppressing and racist system. The plight of Aborigines in Australia is well documented (see, Einfeld, 1993, *Response by Governments to the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 1992), and little is likely to change in the way they view their future chances while their oppressed position continues. Schools have little immediate control over racism and oppression in the wider community, though they should realise and play out their obligation to address those problems within their own practices. (See, for example, responsibilities for school implementation listed in the NSW Department of School Education's *Anti-racism Policy Statement*, 1992.) They must, however, acknowledge that education, and consequently their own curriculum, are implicated in the maintenance of an unequal society. The relationship between Greytown School and its Koori community illustrated many difficulties impeding the educational progress of Aboriginal students. The school worked towards addressing problems of gaining equal access to the school curriculum. Historically, many Aboriginal school

students have been denied access to school through exclusion first, on racial grounds¹, and later within school discipline policies. Moreover, once access was gained, assessment practices frequently relegated Koori students to low academic streams in normal classes, and special classes for slow learners. By contrast, at Greytown, Koori students were encouraged to come to school, and their needs, as Aboriginal students, were considered when curriculum decisions were undertaken. Through the school curriculum and a supportive atmosphere where positive relationships were encouraged between students and teachers, attempts were made not to exclude Koori students within the school relationship. This was appreciated by Aboriginal parents, many of whom indicated that the major priority was happiness for their children and having teachers that Koori children could trust on a personal level. However, data in Chapter 5 revealed that there was an increasing realisation by some Koori parents that this was not enough. Koori students continued to fail. The danger in this realisation was that low community expectations of school success were likely to be reinforced, even when a school was ostensibly trying to make a difference. The key for long term change would seem to rely on both the school and the community to agree on the point of the school's failure and to look for joint ways of addressing the problem. It seems clear that overcoming community expectations of student failure is an issue which requires time, during which individual schools must continually prove themselves at their own institutional level. It is difficult to overcome community fear when that fear influences curriculum and classroom practice. Like the personal trust

¹ Until 1972 there was a regulation in the NSW Department of Education's Handbook which stated that Aboriginal children could be excluded from school on the request of one non-Aboriginal parent from the school's community (Harris, 1978b).

which some teachers gain from their Koori students because it has been earned, community trust for a school will only be gained when it is deserved.

In a similar way, overcoming student opposition to crucial aspects of the curriculum should not be considered a straight forward task. The complexity is obvious from the data, when it was seen that quiet classrooms at Greytown did not necessarily indicate that opposition and future resistance had been eliminated. On the contrary, a quiet classroom often meant that teachers had compromised their curriculum. Attempts to introduce more difficult lessons would cause the opposition to resurface. But a continuation of the no risk classroom environment intensified the conditions of resistance and heightened the possibility of future school rejection. There is irony in the validity and invalidity of Koori students' oppositional responses. That is, there is logic in their opposition given the history of the education of Aboriginal students. Yet the nature of this opposition did not seem to differentiate between methods, regardless of intention or potential. In this way, students could well oppose and undermine practices which might have otherwise had the potential to enhance educational outcomes. Such opposition is arguably an invalid student response. Since, as clearly indicated by the data, all classroom practices involving risk taking and/or work in the literacy or language areas were likely to be opposed, any pedagogical change will be difficult. Jones (1989) identifies the problem of introducing a different curriculum to resistant students, arguing that these students are likely to reject what is offered, even though the intent of the teachers might be to liberate and empower students. Therefore, as with the community, there are inherent difficulties in looking for change solely from within the student position. It is more productive to consider how teachers

and the school may work at moving beyond their point of failure. Both of these are now considered.

The first step in this process would be in the specific awareness by teachers of the point of failure. The data identified that a pattern was set early in the school lives of the Koori students and that curriculum compromise in the first years at school produced effects throughout primary school and into high school. From an awareness that the nature of the curriculum was failing the students, teachers would need to shift from the general feelings of inevitability and the uneasy belief that nothing else could be done. The hegemonic processes would have to be challenged, rather than be accepted by the staff. It was revealed in the data that key factors influencing Koori students' responses to their classrooms were the fear of the curriculum, the need to avoid shame, and subsequent feelings that surviving or rejecting school were the main options. These factors needed to be considered when planning curriculum. When teachers acknowledged that in the earliest school years they had to develop a curriculum for the Koori students clearly aimed at encouraging risk taking, their focus would be more keenly directed at a solution to the students' oppositional behaviour. Given the findings of this thesis that classroom practice is not solely determined by the teachers, this would be a difficult task. Yet, clearly, it provides a positive direction for pedagogical change. Importantly also, the responsibility must be accepted by the teachers to develop a curriculum which is not underpinned with a subtle deficit logic. In particular, the key issue of risk taking in areas of literacy and language would need special attention. Specifically, it would seem that teachers could profit from looking very closely at their own practices in the checking of, and assessment of students'

classroom work. Assessment is seen to have a major bearing on social justice. In a systemic context, it is argued that assessment “functions to maintain the social power and prestige of dominant groups” (Connell, 1993:75). At the level of classroom interaction, the research data highlighted the threat of assessment practices to Koori students. As part of the daily lessons, assessment practices were likely to bring feelings of shame and were implicated in the students’ reluctance to take risks. Changes to the pedagogical relationships in the classrooms would need to accommodate assessment procedures which do not threaten the learners in the process. Innovative qualitative assessment allowing negotiations between learners and teachers seem to provide a positive direction for development and incorporation into the fabric of lessons (see, among others, Woodward, 1993). I would also argue that some other innovation in the nature of classroom work should be attempted. Consider, for example, the peer tutoring project described in Chapter 3. Under this scheme, some Koori students were moved away from their fear of failure. Reading was carried out in the school's Community Room, thus conveying the idea of community acceptance of what was happening. Members of the Koori community dropped in at times to see how the children were doing. One of the most productive sessions was when one of the tutor's mothers stayed for the whole time. Her baby crawled around the floor or was cared for in turn by the Koori students. All the while the others worked keenly. If the students got off task it was the Koori mother, not the supervising teacher, who pulled them into line. This different approach to teaching and learning offers an example of the school relationship seeming to successfully interplay with the educational relationship. That is, a supportive and culturally congruent environment was being used to improve levels of literacy. It became

apparent during this study that literacy was a key issue in the relationship that Koori students had with the school curriculum. The whole domain of early literacy and risk taking among Koori students seems a vital area for future research. This is particularly so when it is clear, in this context at least, that many Koori students are lost from their very earliest years at school. The interrelated factors of reluctance and inability to read significantly contribute to this loss. A final consideration for Greytown teachers would be the nature of their relationships with the students. The development of close relationships between teachers and students was a cornerstone of the school's discipline policy, and was seen by the school to play a major role in the way the students felt towards their school. However, it was obvious from the data that there became a point at which the relationships interfered with the curriculum. Insistence that students engage with the curriculum appeared to compromise the buddy-like relationship, since "At Greytown, the relationship with students became an end in itself rather than a means to an end" (Hatton, Munns, and Nicklin Dent, 1996). Teachers at Greytown needed to find ways through student opposition while keeping in place a curriculum which offers educational success. Decisions would then have to be made about how the school's friendly ethos could be maintained, without condemning its most needy students.

Directions for whole school change would similarly require an initial appreciation of the tension between the public and private domains of the work at Greytown. Curriculum decisions could then continue to focus on the Koori students while more specifically focussing on the successful articulation of school and educational relationships. Thus there would need to be a reappraisal of the school's philosophy

which would challenge the status of the school relationship as an end in itself. Again, the school would need to see the early years of schooling as a major priority, focussing its institutional energy on eliminating conditions which place young Koori students at an educational risk from which few are able to recover. No longer should it be acceptable for Greytown School to continue to promote a “cubbyhouse” mentality, appearing to protect and nurture students and then sending them unprepared to High School, set up to adopt a resistance stance. Greytown School needs to acknowledge that despite its efforts in keeping its difficult Koori students happy, future rejection of schooling is grounded in the school’s own failure to eliminate its own conditions of resistance. Conclusions from this study suggest that Koori students rejecting school, that is, reaching their “end of the line” (Furlong, 1991), was not solely a High School problem.

Greytown School attempted unsuccessfully to bring social justice to its educational context. The next section proposes how Greytown and other schools serving communities in poverty and facing similar educational problems might plan a socially just curriculum.

Contextualising the Curriculum

Johnston (1990) considers that socially reproductive school practices may be countered by *contextual thinking*. In theory, Johnston (1990:29) says that contextual thinking involves deliberating on both what needs to be learnt by all learners regardless of their background, and the social context of the learning. Contextualising

the curriculum, therefore, requires a dialectic between what has to be learnt which will encourage equal educational outcomes, and the needs of the learners within their social and cultural context. In practice, such a socially just intent is not easily reached, and Greytown School's story illustrates the difficulty and complexity of the task. In Chapter 6, Greytown School's difficulty was discussed by employing an analytical framework which illustrated the interplay of school and educational relationships (Figure 6.3). This framework is now offered as a heuristic device through which curriculum might be contextualised at other schools. The framework satisfies Johnston's (1990) notion of contextual thinking at a theoretical level. The social and cultural context of the learning corresponds with the concept of the school relationship. The universal learnings which are needed by all students is reflected in the concept of the educational relationship. The framework, showing how the interplay of these two relationships is crucial for educational success, provides a more concrete basis for making practical curriculum decisions.

Following conclusions reached in the analysis of this thesis, the nature of the school relationship would be a vital consideration. The context of the school milieu should drive all decisions aimed at encouraging students to accept their school under their own social and cultural terms. Positive school relationships would aim to minimise the risk of large numbers of students being alienated or alienating themselves from their school. Potential resistance would need to be distinguished from other causes of student disaffection and allowed for in discipline policies. Importantly, evaluations would need to guard against the school relationship becoming an end in itself. Here the framework serves a valuable purpose in depicting the interplay of the two

relationships as the central curriculum issue. This happens in two ways. First, in the construction of classroom practice, schools and teachers have the opportunity to recognise and deal with influences affecting their curriculum decisions. Figure 6.3 shows these influences are combinations of previous educational experiences, attitudes held about society, and, as a consequence, people in the local community, and the nature of their teaching experiences in the immediate context. Reflection which is informed by a knowledge of how their teaching is shaped, might then encourage a less conservative pedagogy:

Where teachers are willing to reflect and try to assess the impact of various influences on their work including their attitudes and values, the socialising impact of the classroom and the impact of the local social context, they are much more likely to be able to shape their teaching in ways that make excellence a reality for increasingly more students (Hatton, 1994a:15).

The framework also shows that classroom practice is not fully determined by the decisions and actions of the teachers. Teachers need to understand that their curriculum is constructed in the dynamic exchange between themselves and their students. Within this exchange, teachers should be aware of how students respond culturally to their school and classroom. An appreciation of the notions of cultural production (Willis, 1981, 1983) and the cultural production of classroom practice (Jones, 1989), provides opportunities for teachers to gain a better understanding of diverse social and cultural learning contexts.

Second, the figure shows that the boundaries of both relationships are not fixed. How successfully the school relationship articulates with the educational relationship through classroom practices which allow access to academic knowledge determines the restrictions of the educational relationship. At Greytown School the school

relationship was seen to dominate the curriculum and deny educational advantage. This ensured, for most students, a restriction of their academic potential and a narrowing of the educational relationship. Moreover, the data showed that when academic potential is restricted, and that restriction is recognised by the students, the potential for resistance is heightened. The framework serves as a reminder that the interplay of the two relationships is the crucial site of resistance.

The evidence of this thesis suggests that contextualising the school curriculum is an important step towards overcoming student opposition and resistance, and challenging socially reproductive educational practices. The framework (Figure 6.3) shows how schools facing similar difficulties to Greytown may be able to accept the challenge of responding in positive ways to their own contexts. Importantly also, the framework brings together theory and practice. Therefore, schools adopting it as a model for curriculum development have an opportunity to reflect on their process of contextualisation through action research.

Summary and Conclusion

It has been argued that when schools strive towards non-reproductive education they face many barriers. Attempting to find a curriculum which serves the school's social and cultural context and facilitates academic achievement continues to challenge teachers who work in poor communities. This research has shown that the solution is not to be found in a school which becomes a cubbyhouse. Schools need to offer access to and participation in, not protection from, the educational world.